

Navigating Portlaw's River Clodiagh - Sep 2011

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On a Saturday afternoon in September 2011, three barges waited on the River Suir for the tide to rise and take them over the bar at the entrance to the River Clodiagh, to begin their journey to Portlaw, County Waterford.

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I remember being captivated some years ago, when I first read Brian Goggin's account of this town. Here was this fascinating place, near where I had chosen to live, whose founder at the beginning of the 1800s established precedents on how to run an organisation in a fair way while making profit; at the same time ensuring those employed were educated, healthy, saved their money and lived in good housing. The houses, hospital, school, courthouse, industrial buildings and the canal, built on a green field site between 1826 and 1876 were amazingly innovative. All this was originally conceived by David Malcomson when in his sixties and then carried on by his three sons and used as a model for other planned nineteenth century towns in the British Isles.

The nineteenth century Cotton Industry in Portlaw had a supply chain that started with bales of raw cotton shipped from the USA on Malcomson's ships, taken up the River Suir by barge or on smaller ships, then via the River Clodiagh and the Portlaw Canal delivered directly into the factory. There it was woven into cotton fabric. The finished product was then taken down the Canal, the Clodiagh and the Suir into Waterford, where it was shipped to countries throughout the world. To read more about this and Portlaw's later industrial history see IWH The Portlaw Clodiagh and the Portlaw Heritage blog. So here we were 180 years later about to begin the journey up the Clodiagh with the tide but without cargo. However, in Aqualegia's case there were a few trees and mud and shale banks in the way. But in time, we did glide with the tide for a few metres past the entrance. Then we stopped for a while; then another glide and so on. We were accompanied by our friends from the Suir in the Carrick Rescue RIB and Giles in Hawthorn's RIB.

We proved that the left arch of the well preserved stone bridge is navigable. Trust Me Scout passed us by as they came through the middle arch, and then we went ahead of them; our sequence depended on who had found the shoals under our hulls. We passed by 68M who were stopped at the edge of a wide bend, with a suggestion from them to stay in the middle on this bit!

The light started to fade, so with Aoife and Simon on the bow, and Geraldine and Eunice peering out on either side of the wheelhouse, I steered what was hoped was the right course while the tide gently lifted us nearer to our goal. Then we got gloriously stuck in a really overgrown part, the increasing flow had wedged us right across the river and we needed a nudge from Trust Me Scout. We left the VHF aerial in the trees and on another occasion had to make a decision on whether to leave the barge pole or Aoife behind, chose to abandon barge pole!

It struck us all around this time, why family and friends think we're mad. Our version of a Saturday night on the town; coaxing a barge through overgrown flora on a river last navigated 75 plus years ago. What fun!

When we caught up with 72M, who had gone up earlier against the tide, we got shoved completely around. Since we were just a few metres from our chosen Quay where the River Clodiagh meets the Canal, we went astern for the last bit and moored up outside 72M. Once 68M and Trust Me Scout were moored, we all hastily congregated and ate food that had been prepared on the way - tasted delicious and of course, we toasted our success.

Another real sense of accomplishment, from what has now been named the HBA's 2011 Five Sister Fleet; all four barges had proven that the Clodiagh is navigable.

Note:

In its present form, this is a wide river, more than 100 feet in many places and the stone bridge has considerable clearance. We had reconnoitred the river in a small boat and examined parts of it at low tide so felt it was worth an attempt. With very basic maintenance, mostly cutting back the overhanging shrubs, this could be a wonderful tidal cruising place with more than enough room for boats to pass each other. At this time, the only place we have identified for mooring is the old Quay at the Lime Kilns below the town.

In our case, we could have started our journey later but erred on the side of caution as we did not have an accurate measurement of the bridge clearance (someone pinched our measuring string but that's another story). Plus as the high tide was late in the day, we wanted to be moored before the light faded altogether.

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Many thanks to Giles Byford, Michael Hickey, Anne Walsh and others for these photos

{gallery}Memories - Portlaw's River Clodiagh 2011 B{/gallery}

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